"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE RURAL FAMILY in 1965*

by Edward W. O'Rourke

At first glance it might seem foolish to discuss the rural family in 1965. Society is changing so rapidly and so many forces influence family life that it is difficult to know clearly the state of family life today and almost impossible to predict what it will be five years from now.

Yet, there is a rational and urgently needed approach to this problem. We know a great deal about trends in agriculture, community life, education, etc. which will influence family life in 1965. We can derive from the traditions of our churches and nation basic principles and ideals according to which we can evaluate these trends. We can decide which trends we wish to encourage and accelerate and which we should oppose and neutralize. We must marshal economic, social, educational and religious institutions in an effort to better family life. Instead of letting blind forces determine the quality of rural family life in 1965, we should labor now to guarantee that it will be better than family life today.

The term, "rural" many refer to either the rural farm or rural non-farm. In this paper we are chiefly concerned with the rural farm family. When we intend to include the non-farm families, the context will so indicate.

RURAL FAMILY VALUES

The family is the most basic of all our institutions. It powerfully affects both the individual and society. During the child's most formative years, the home and his parents make up his world.

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*An address given by the Rev. Edward W. O'Rourke, Executive Director, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, at the American Country Life Conference, Chevy Chase, Maryland, July 12, 1960.

His character and attitudes are largely the result of his relationships with this little world. Since the family is the unit of which society is made, since society's future leaders and future trouble makers are being shaped in families today, welfare of society is chiefly determined by the quality of family life. Therefore, any force which affects family life is significant. Although other values must be weighed in deciding whether to encourage or oppose such a force, still its bearing on family life is often the most important single norm for evaluation.

It has been often asserted that the countryside is the natural habitat of the family. In other words, the family in rural areas enjoys an optimum opportunity to fulfill its potentialities. Although recent trends have lessened the differences between the environment of the rural family and that of urban families, I submit that the countryside can still be correctly referred to as the natural habitat of the family. The following are some of the reasons for this opinion:

American farm families are usually located a half mile or more from their closest neighbor. This makes it possible for the members of the family to work, pray and play together without numerous interruptions.

Moreover, farming is a family enterprise. Approximately 95 percent of all farms in the United States are operated by and for families. Each member of the family has a task to perform; even the small child helps with simple chores. Planning the farming operation, bookkeeping and similar tasks are usually shared by the father, mother and elder children of the family.

The child prospers in an envriornment of this sort. He realizes that he is not a liability to his parents. His work is a real contribution to the family's income. Gradually he develops a sense of initiative and responsibility. He realizes that failure to do his job will badly affect others whom he loves. In this environment work is a privilege, not a burden. Through work the farm boy or girl gains status. His own self-respect and esteem in the eyes of others stem directly from his willingness to do his job thoroughly and cheerfully. The character nurtured in such a milieu lessens delinquency during youth and is a preparation for good citizenship and religious loyalty in later years.

The father of a family on the land takes on the character of manhood with its physical strength, moral stamina and fatherly creativeness. His children see him at work, making decisions, solving problems, directing others and acting like a true husbandman. This contrasts sharply with the experience of many urban and suburban children who never see their fathers at work, who picture them as rather helpless and indolent individuals who get in the way and interfere with mother's work on weekends and evenings.

The mother of a family on the farm becomes more motherly in her development and achievements. It is there that she blossoms out into her full womanhood. She brings to her family a greater realization of the dignity, sacredness and importance of motherhood.

This close relationship between family life and the land gives rise to a significant socio-economic institution -- the family farm. The family farm is not merely a place to live. It certainly is not just a place to work. It represents a way of life. It is a bulwark of Christianity and democracy. Many persons presume that the family farm is relatively small. This is not necessarily true. The size of a family farm will vary according to the location and the type of crops produced. It may be a 5-acre truck farm in Delaware, a 100-acre dairy farm in Wisconsin, a 250-acre corn-hog farm in Iowa, a 2,000-acre wheat farm in Kansas or a 10,000-acre ranch in Texas.

A family farm is one operated by a family for the support of that family. The family provides the managerial decisions and most of the labor. It depends upon the income of the farm for its livelihood. In other words, such a farming operation is a family enterprise. Very few such enterprises exist in urban areas today. There is, therefore, great significance in the fact that most American farms are still operated by and for the family. Consequently, economic and social forces should be weighed with a view to their bearing upon preservation of the family farm pattern.

TRENDS AFFECTING THE RURAL FAMILY

Agriculture is now experiencing a revolution comparable to the industrial revolution of a century ago. Farming in America is being rapidly mechanized. During the period 1947 to 1954 the value of machines on farms doubled; the number of tractors increased from 2.2 million to 4.6 million; and the number of combines and corn pickers tripled. This means less tedious, manual labor and more leisure for farmers. It also has occasioned the increase of the size of farms and the consequent decrease in the number of farm families.

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In 1940 the average size farm was 220 acres; in 1954 it was 336 acres. In 1949 farm population was 17.5 percent of the nation's population; in 1959 it was 12 percent. This means that there are fewer families enjoying the social, religious and cultural advantages of rural life.

It would be appropriate at this juncture to mention the 2½ million low income farm families whose lot is certainly not one of advantage. Theirs is a special problem,

educational program is needed. Many of you present at this conference are leaders of organizations which can and should assist in such a program.

Religious and community leaders must study ways to better integrate newcomers into the community and utilize their talents, thus creating an atmosphere conducive to better family living. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference has recently published two policy statements whichrelate to this task, namely, "The Non-Urban Parish," and "A Program for the Rural Community."

NEED FOR FAMILY EDUCATION

The countryside still affords an environment conducive to sound family life but not in the same degree as in days-gone-by. We must labor to preserve these environmental bulwarks for wholesome family life. Our efforts, however, will not completely stay the forces which are reducing both rural and urban family life to a common level -- a level of mediocrity in many of its phases. Hence, we can depend less upon traditions and environmental conditions to maintain the more desirable characteristics of the rural family. We must turn more toward educational and inspirational programs.

Young people cannot rely entirely upon their experience in their parental homes for preparation for their role as married people. Even that which the parents exemplify may be overlaid with many false attitudes derived from television shows, movies, novels, conversations, etc. Marriage preparation courses in our schools and conferences in our parishes fill a very great need. Churches should be especially active in this educational undertaking. Religious and moral principles must be closely related to family ideals and policies. A secular educational agency can never adequately treat these ideals and policies. If we permit the home to be secularized, the last citadel of integrated Christian living will have perished.

The Catholic Church provides pre-cana conferences for engaged couples. These are series of lectures treating the religious, medical, psychological, economic and sociological aspects of marriage. Married couples are urged to attend cana conferences in which their duties to each other, their children and their community is stressed. Couples who attend these conferences are encouraged to join a family apostolate called the "Christian Family Movement." Six to ten couples belong to each CFM group. They meet bi-monthly to plan together ways and means to strengthen their ideals and to attach common problems.

CONCLUSION

This sort of an educational program, together with the environmental influences of the countryside, should make possible a very vigorous and wholesome family life in 1965. The American Country Life Association includes in its membership leaders of the churches, farm organizations, governmental agencies and educational institutions. These are the leaders who have the privilege and responsibility to guide rural families toward this goal. The effectiveness of this leadership will determine in large part the quality of rural family life in 1965.

not within the scope of this paper. Mechanization and low prices for produce do not affect these families so much as the middle income farm families. Similarly, farm programs and private projects which aid middle income families do not substantially alter the plight of low income families. One of the organizations capable of assisting low income families is the Farmers Home Administration. We should urge a re-evaluation of the role of this agency.

Net farm income has declined in recent years while incomes of other groups have gone up and the cost of living has increased. In 1952, national farm income was $15.1 billion; in 1953, 13.3 billion; in 1954, 12.7 billion; in 1956, 11.6 billion and in 1959, a new low of 10.3 billion: the U.S.D.A. forecasts still less income for 1960. This further accelerates the decrease in the numbers of farm families. It deprives some families of the economic security necessary for an optimum family life; it prompts members of such families to seek off-farm employment. In 1958, 28 percent of net income of farmers was derived from off-farm employment.

In recent years many non-farm families have moved to rural communities. These families bring new ideas and values to these communities. Sometimes there is friction between the old and new residents, thus creating a less than ideal atmosphere for the persons involved.

The rapid adoption of television by rural families tends to make them less distinct culturally from urban families. (In 1959, 73 percent of farm homes had television sets compared with 3 percent in 1950. In 1959, 86 percent of rural non-farm homes had sets; 89 percent of urban homes were so equipped.) Television is a passive sort of recreation and contrasts sharply with the active recreation once prevalent among rural people.

Some less tangible but very significant changes are reported in Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 215 of the U.S.D.A., "Keeping Abreast of Change in the Rural Community." The following are among the changes listed: Many functions formerly performed in the farm home are now being performed outside the home. Home life and work life are more separated than in the past. This is due in part to the increase in off-farm work by farmers and their wives, and in part to the mechanical nature of farm work. More of the rural family's recreational and social life is sought away from the home and even away from the local community. The pace of family living has increased tremendously. The result is less time for intra-family pursuits.

WAYS TO STRENGTHEN THE RURAL FAMILY

This brief survey of trends affecting family life makes it obvious that these are times of significant changes and that most of these changes imperil some of the values traditionally associated with the rural family. Some of these trends can be offset at least partially.

Education and legislation might prevent unwarranted increase of the size of farm and the consequent lessening of numbers of farm families. We do not wish to maintain farm units too small for efficiency and too small to adequately support a family. There are, however, many studies to show that the middle sized farm is most efficient. For example, Professor M. L. Mosher at the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois recently published studies which suggest that the two-man farm is the most efficient.

Even more important than the size of the farm is the preservation of the family farm as the basic socio-economic institution in the countryside. As the number of family farms decreases and the number of families merely employed on farms increases, many of the ideals of rural family life will be impaired. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the preservation of the family farm one of its most important objectives. A number of public officials and leaders of farm organizations concur in this opinion and assist us pursue this objective. Time does not permit a complete listing of the ways in which we are pursuing this objective. Let us mention two public laws which we think are injurious to the family farm and which we urge to be repealed. Public Law 78 legalizes the importation of hundreds of thousands of low-paid agricultural workers from Mexico each year. Family farmers must compete with these under-paid workers. Secondly, we urge an end to the payment of unlimited subsidies to large farms. Subsidies can be justified only on the principle of distributive justice according to which assistance is to be given in proportion to the needs of the recipient and with a view to the effect of such assistance upon the common good. No single farmer has a rightful need for tens of thousands of dollars of tax payers' money. Neither is the common good advanced by such unlimited subsidies which often enable wealthy farmers to increase their acreage at the expense of the operators of family farms.

Off-farm work might be helpful or harmful to family life. If the conditions of work and wages are inadequate, harm will result. If mothers of small children are attracted in large numbers to jobs outside the home, those children will be badly affected. We are aware of the fact that underemployment is one of the greatest economic problems of the American farm family, but we insist that the relocation of small industries in the countryside must be wisely planned. All too often these industries seek to employ women rather than men. They do not always promote the welfare of the family or community. This is a field in which church and community leaders must take a hand. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is now engaged in a large scale study of these issues and will soon publish its findings.

Much could be done to assure farm families of a better income. Collective bargaining in the marketplace and cooperative purchasing of equipment are among the means for accomplishing this. Such cooperative undertaking will not be effective nor lasting unless those who participate are imbued with the ideology of cooperation. Most American farmers have drifted far from this ideology. A thorough